Region III Public Meeting 3 —
Local Environmental Groups
Salisbury, Maryland
March 11, 1999

Background
In October 1998, the EPA Region III Public Sector Needs Identification Team launched an assessment of customer needs and preferences for environmental information. This assessment involved a series of five facilitated public meetings conducted in cooperation with the EPA Region III office. Each meeting investigated a different stakeholder group, its current information gathering methods, its information needs, special issues for the stakeholder group, and investigation of the Customer Information Process (CIP) and Information Attribute (IA) priorities for the group.

The CIP and IA analysis tools were developed in 1997 for an EPA customer study conducted by the Center for Environmental Information and Statistics (CEIS) and the Environmental Monitoring for Public Access and Community Tracking (EMPACT) Program. This study sought to characterize customer needs for environmental and health-related information, preferences for accessing information, and interest in having more time-relevant monitoring and reporting capabilities. The CIP/IA framework is described in more detail below.

Summary Statement
The public meeting in Salisbury, Maryland was attended by three representatives of local rural environmental interest groups. This group focussed on issues pertaining to water quality and wetland conservation around the Chesapeake Bay, as well as coastal zone management issues in the Mid-Atlantic Region. The information needs of this group also focussed on regulations and environmental impact data. There was general agreement among participants concerning these information needs, provision, and uses. Two of the three individuals did not use the Internet or E-mail, indicating that an information "disadvantage" exists for some environmental groups. This group wanted information from EPA that would help them understand EPA's mission, what information the Agency had available, and how to obtain that information.

Wish List
The group was asked to describe how EPA could be most helpful with regard to their information needs. Members focussed on ways to identify and acquire EPA information through better information management, reference development, and enhancement of personal network. The group said that:

- EPA should provide detailed and specific information on environmental problems (what they are, their locations, and history). Data should be cited, and the implications of environmental impacts should be clearly described.

- Environmental information should be incorporated into planning documents. For example, local TV news programs should provide information on existing and emerging environmental issues.
- To make information more accessible, a printed directory should be developed that contains names, phone numbers, and E-mail addresses of individuals within the Agency. It should identify Agency responsibilities, and cross-reference individuals with areas of authority and jurisdiction.
- A printed directory of publications should be made available.
- Information obtained through contacts made at conferences and workshops was extremely valuable, as were environmental publication lists.
- Public education should be a key concern of the Agency, and field trips would be an important component of a sound educational program.

Information Experience

The group focussed on emerging and existing regulations affecting land use and conservation, as well as environmental impact data. Participants stated that they relied on information supplied by experts from other environmental organizations and universities, and emphasized the importance of contacts, particularly those made through conferences and workshops, as critical to meeting information needs. Two of the three participants had no experience with the Internet, suggesting that small, locally-oriented environmental organizations may sometimes be at a disadvantage from the standpoint of information access. These participants relied more on traditional sources to obtain information, including self-maintained libraries and phone calls to various personal contacts. "We do things the old fashioned way, we type it, then mail it . . . and make phone calls." Another participant used electronic resources to some degree, although she focussed more on E-mail than Internet searches. She remarked that time involvement was a barrier to Internet use. One participant used the county library, and bought the library's used books to supplement her own collection, while another stated that small town libraries were of no value.

As a whole, the group reported that they depended on highly regarded experts for credible information. One participant remarked, "we really rely on national groups." There was also an admission that scientific opinions that supported their side of an argument were easier to believe. Whenever possible, they made an effort to verify scientific findings with their own observations. Familiarity with an organization, and the individuals within it, also tended to enhance the perception of information credibility, as did data that were referenced. The importance of timeliness varied by issue. When testimony was involved, site visits were often performed beforehand.

Participants felt that education was the key to solving environmental problems. They suggested that regular television spots on the local news would be a useful way information that would to help institute change to the public.

Participants also said that EPA needed to pressure local governments regarding environmental protection, and that EPA could provide those governments with maps and other information so

that local governments could review proposed planning with more scrutiny. One participant said. "[EPA] needs to enforce the law, that is the bottom line."

Problems with EPA Information

Participants said that they had a few contacts at EPA, but in general, they did not have a good grasp of what the responsibilities of EPA National and Regional offices were, or what information was available. The group had mixed results when approaching EPA for information. Members commented that a major barrier was not knowing who to contact. Overall, participants did not have much success using EPA products, but would like to use them. One participant said, "we need to have a 800 number, a directory, or some kind of information database that tells us what they have that we can use." Participants also agreed that a list of publicly available EPA documents would be helpful.

The group suggested the development of a printed directory. Such a directory should be hierarchically structured, and include names, phone numbers, and E-mail addresses. That directory should also cross-reference people with responsibilities, indicating who to go to for what. The document would need to clearly specify what the responsibilities were for Region III versus those of National Headquarters, and where to go for further information pertaining to issues beyond EPA's purview. For an example, one participant said, "If you had a fish kill, or a major chemical spill, who would you call?" Participants thought that an 800 number would be particularly helpful, and mentioned that the Maryland Department of Environment's 800 number was useful in the past. The 800 numbers were particularly important to small environmental organizations for financial reasons. The one Internet user in the group did not use the EPA listserve because she was concerned that she would be inundated with information. Another participant said that Region III should make a newsletter available.

The group felt that it was important for EPA to work in partnership with states. EPA could, for example, ensure that recommended warnings on pesticides are posted on products.

Special Areas

The discussion clearly indicated that some local environmental groups did not have access to electronically available information and data sources through the Internet. One participant indicated that her organization was funded out of her own pocket, and that keeping overhead costs down was a serious concern. She said she relied on more traditional sources, "doing things the old fashioned way," such as printed documents or contacts, for her information. The EPA cannot rely on the Internet and other electronic information sources to reach these groups.

Participants thought that partnerships between local, rural environmental groups had a real and strategic value in their efforts to leverage resources for public education efforts. Attendees indicated that they would like to see EPA facilitate partnerships among local organizations and also with larger organizations with more resources. For example, one participant remarked that he relied on regular outings with a large, national environmental organization to keep abreast of local environmental issues and conditions. He summarized, "checking information through field trips is good." The group thought that EPA could partner with large, national organizations and small, local organizations to sponsor members of the smaller organizations to participate in meetings and field trips.

As a whole, the group believed that the Agency should continue to support environmental education efforts within the public school system. In addition, they commented that the EPA should educate the public through all means. As one member stated, "Anything would help."

Customer Information Process/Information Attributes

EPA adopted a framework to compile and categorize meeting commentary. This framework included an assessment of the Customer Information Process (CIP) and the Information Attributes (IA) important to EPA stakeholders. The CIP has four basic elements: Identification (establishing the existence and location of information), Acquisition (obtaining the information in an appropriate format), Management (adapting, translating, integrating, or combining the information to the customer's unique purpose), and Use (applying, interpreting, or assimilating the information in a value-added manner). Second, the meetings have been assessed according to Information Attributes. Topical attributes for the IA analysis included: Media (e.g., air, water); Industry (sector), Geography (e.g., site specific, local, regional); Legislation/Regulation; Time Dimension (e.g., update schedule); Demographics; Accuracy/Reliability; and Other Topics such as health concerns

> **Constraints on Small, Local Organizations** The group supported a number of initiatives and approaches to EPA's information and support strategy. These strategies reveal a few constraints that especially effect these small organizations.
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> - *Low-tech:* these organizations do not have the overhead to provide for substantial electronic access, and do not have Internet access through local sources.
> - *Time:* often understaffed, the group was wary of universal information providers, such as listserves which they found difficult to manage.
> - *Structure and money*: these groups desired support from EPA, in order to take advantage of opportunities that already exist to partner with larger environmental groups.

In terms of the Customer Information Process, the group focussed on issues related to identification and acquisition. There was significant discussion regarding the identification of EPA environmental information. Specifically, group members expressed a sense of confusion regarding what EPA did and didn't oversee, and therefore, what information EPA had available to the public. They found that conferences and other personal contacts were a key mechanism for locating people and information within EPA.

The group agreed that data acquisition was hampered by the inability of participants to first identify what EPA had available. Most of the success acquiring information occurred when contacts were used. For example, one participant said that she received information from EPA through a University of Maryland Eastern Shore educators meeting and through the Coastal Bay Program. That participant also stated that she generally didn't know what EPA had available, or how to access it. Another participant said that they had success using E-mail to obtain environmental education handouts for use by children.

The group discussed information attributes pertaining to media (water and wetlands), geography, and timeliness. The group's media priorities were wetlands, coastal areas and water quality, and air pollution impacts on wetlands, which were the primary issues of concern where these individuals lived and worked. There was a moderate amount of discussion regarding geography; most focus was given to the idea that EPA could provide support to local governments to ensure that non-tidal wetlands were better preserved. Lastly, the group agreed that the importance of timeliness depended on the issue. In general, timeliness was found most important in those circumstances where testimony was involved, and those instances when current information, generally obtained from field visits prior to testimony, was needed.

EPA/Region III
Group members had some interaction with EPA Region III personnel, primarily those that worked on wetland and pesticides issues. They established these contacts through intermediaries in other organizations or through having met EPA personnel at various conferences, public meetings, and workshops. In general, contact with Region III personnel was minimal. Participants felt that Region III should have a newsletter and a directory to identify contacts for information on various subjects or for emergency situations. The group said that a publications list would assist them in understanding what information EPA had available. Participants suggested that EPA Region III form partnerships with environmental organizations to support environmental education, not only for schools and students, but also for members of smaller environmental organizations to participate in meetings, field trips and other events that provide support and education.

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